



## **Testimony of**

**Mary Symkowicz, President  
East Hartford Federation of Para-Educators, AFT Local 4257, AFL-CIO**

**HB5523: An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Paraprofessional Staffing  
Levels**

**Education Committee  
March 12, 2014**

My name is Mary Symkowicz, president AFT local 4257, East Hartford Federation of Paraeducators. I live and work in East Hartford, CT as a paraeducator in the public school system. I currently work as a special education para in a self-contained classroom in which there are students with severe developmental disabilities. HB5523, an act establishing a task force to study paraprofessional staffing levels, is an important bill because it ensures safety for our most fragile students. It also, in some cases, will help keep the schools' other students safer. Basic needs and I.E.P. goals cannot be met.

When there is a shortage of staffing the schools risk unsafe conditions. The developmentally delayed students are not able to be watched and they "escape" from their classrooms and can be lost within the school, or worse, outside, off school grounds. Students who normally have one-on-one coverage may have violent, physical outbursts that may injure fellow students inside their classroom or out in the school community for inclusion, or staff members who do not have adequate staff to help restrain child. During lunch period, if staff is not there, students are not able to be taken care of, i.e... cutting up food fast enough before a child grabs it to eat causing choking, getting students through the lunch line without any disruptions, confusion or outbursts. Maintaining their different toileting issues is a challenge, too, while there is no staff to watch the other children at the same time. In other cases, some children are allowed to go ahead to classes alone due to no staff availability, while para attempts to meet them there from another place in the school. If a child ends up in wrong place it could be very dangerous. A few minutes could be detrimental in a child's life and the school's reputation.

Meeting goals, academically or life skills, are difficult. Many times, if staffing is short, the children are unable to do their individual goals. The classroom works in groups, keeping the students busy, but not attending to their educational legal goals. The teacher has planning time which is usually cut short or eliminated due to the teacher having to be a para and assist in P.E., inclusion, lunch... again the students' classwork goals suffer. We, as a class staff, turn into babysitters simply trying to get to the end of a school day without incidences.

Paras who teach reading are beneficial to the progress of a struggling reader. The more time working in small groups helps students meet their goals in a regular ed. setting. Without reading support many students will not pass mandatory testing goals set upon all children in the education system.

Many of our state's larger populated school systems have many children who are at risk and need support. These schools cannot afford to hire more teachers and paras are a cheap, yet irreplaceable resource. With the demands that have been placed on schools to do inclusive learning, testing, evaluations then there needs to be adequate staffing to allow them to succeed. Maintaining our schools' credibility should be mandatory.